

# 'A Fine Passage': Insights into Early Australian Convict Transportation

## Issue 9: William Richards, First Fleet Contractor

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### Summary

*William Richards, the contractor for Australia's First Fleet, was a humanitarian who invested a great deal of time and effort into hiring good ships and procuring quality provisions for the convicts. He was influenced by the famous prison reformer John Howard, by the sufferings of his Huguenot ancestors, and possibly by the Abolitionists.*

*Historians remember the contractors for the disastrous Second Fleet, and the fact that they made their fortune as slave traders. They also have an obligation to honour the First Fleet contractor who was respected by his contemporaries for the outstanding contribution which he made to the historic voyage.*

## ***First Fleet Contractor***

History has not been kind to William Richards, the contractor for Australia's First Fleet. AGL Shaw ignored him entirely. Robert Hughes confused him with the hulks contractor, Duncan Campbell, and claimed he was 'crooked', having concluded (wrongly) he had under-victualled the fleet. In his encyclopaedic volume about the transportation system, Charles Bateson mentioned him only in passing.<sup>1</sup>

Barnard Eldershaw, Eris O'Brien and Jonathan King thought Richards was only responsible for the victualling. David Hill, Alan Brooke and David Brandon thought he was only responsible for the shipping. Tom Keneally described his contributions as praiseworthy, but gave him credit for things that were never his responsibility.<sup>2</sup>

Wilfrid Oldham, Mollie Gillen and Roger Knight each made contributions to our understanding of the man, but their research appeared in unpublished dissertations and obscure journals that are inaccessible to all but the most persistent of researchers. Among the widely-read scholars, only Alan Frost and Michael Flynn have come close to understanding Richards' role as a transportation contractor, but Frost was mostly interested in the role of government and Flynn was primarily concerned with the Second Fleet.<sup>3</sup>

To appreciate Richards' contribution, we must first understand that there *was* a contract for the First Fleet. Hughes was wrong when he claimed that the First Fleet was 'a government affair from start to finish', and that the convicts were provisioned by the Navy Board. He had followed Bateson, who thought that the contract system began with the *Lady Juliana*, which sailed two years after the First Fleet. Bateson seems to have concluded that with the First Fleet, Richards was nothing more than a shipbroker, signing the charter-party on behalf of the ships' owners.

There *was* a contract for the First Fleet: it was awarded following a competitive tender to the small London shipbroking firm of Richards & Fernie. No copies of the charter party have been found, but it was modelled on the contracts long used by the Navy Board when merchant ships were taken up as naval transports. We know this because of a contract which Richards signed with one of the First Fleet ship owners, which mirrors the terms and conditions of a classic

transportation contract, as well as the charter parties used for the *Lady Juliana* and other ships later taken up as convict transports.

We also have several examples of the contracts and bonds which Richards signed with local justice officials, committing himself, legally and financially, to ensure the convicts were actually transported. These were based on the contracts that had long been used in the North American transportation system.

The convict contractors were responsible for finding ships that were fit-for-purpose, and (in these early years) the provisions that would be consumed by the convicts throughout the voyage. Richards was also to have responsibility for providing the guards, but (well-founded) concerns about mutiny meant that the insurance community would not underwrite the ships on that basis, and the marines, who were going out to the colony in any case, were used for that purpose.

Contrary to what has often been assumed, the ships' masters were also responsible for managing the convicts throughout the voyage. While they enjoyed a great deal of discretion, they were Richards' agents, and he issued them with instructions on how they were to do the job. Zachariah Clark, a former coal merchant, sailed with the fleet as Richards' agent.

Unlike later voyages, where medical care was provided by the ships' surgeons, on the First Fleet, these services were performed by naval surgeons going out to take up residence in the colony. And the Governor-elect of the new colony, in his capacity as commodore of the fleet, insisted that the masters consult with the marine officers on board their ships about the day-to-day management of the prisoners.

Richards assumed substantial commercial risk, evidenced by the fact that he later ran into difficulty when government failed to pay its bills on time. He also brought down the cost of the expedition to government by negotiating a contract with the East India Company for the ships to sail to China after leaving NSW and bring back a cargo of tea. But he encountered bitter opposition from the 'shipping interest' within the Company's Court of Directors, and was only able to find three owners who were prepared to take the risk of a voyage to Canton through the unknown waters of the western Pacific.

The ships which Richards hired for this unprecedented expedition to the far side of the world were not long off the stocks – on average, they had been in the water less than three years, and two of them had been launched that same year. They were much younger than the vessels employed for the Second Fleet (an average of around 13 years) or the Third (more than 16 years), and there can be no question that this contributed to the healthy state of the convicts at the end of the voyage.

The provisions for the convicts were also of an exceptionally high standard. Philip Gidley King, Second Lieutenant of the *Sirius* and Arthur Phillip's aide-de-camp, acknowledged the contribution of the marine officers and the surgeons, but added:

. . .what contributed as much as the above reasons was the goodness of the provisions, which were all wholesome and good. I believe every person in the Fleet were fully sensible of this advantage which cannot fail of doing credit to the contractor, Mr Richards, who contracted with government to furnish the provisions etc for the marines and convicts from England to Botany Bay.<sup>4</sup>

David Collins, the Judge Advocate of the new colony (and shortly to become the Governor's official secretary) spoke of 'the excellent quality of the provisions with which we were supplied by Mr Richards, Junior, the contractor'. And one of the marine officers wrote that 'the provisions served on board were good, and of a much superior quality to those usually supplied by contract', also mentioning Richards by name.<sup>5</sup>

This was only possible because he had gone out of his way to purchase high quality provisions in tight packaging. The bread was almost certainly acquired from Seale and Walters, a firm of Wapping bakers who had a reputation for providing excellent sea biscuit which remained in good condition after several years at sea. This would have come at a cost – Richards must have cut into his margin to ensure that the provisions were this good.<sup>6</sup>

### **Guillaume Richard**

William Richards the Younger was the son of a trans-Atlantic mariner and shipbroker, also named William Richards, who had spent fifteen years of his life shuttling back and forth across the Atlantic, carrying European and Indian goods



from London to New York and returning home with naval stores and mixed cargoes.

On one of these visits, Captain Richards had been introduced to Marie Elizabeth Rou, one of the daughters of Louis Rou, who was for many years the pastor of L'Eglise Française du St Esprit, the French Protestant Church in New York. They married in New York in May 1753. Young William was born in August of the following year and baptised several weeks later at St Esprit, under the name of Guillaume Richard.

Nothing is known of Richards' paternal grandparents, except that his grandfather was a master tailor from Dover. His maternal grandparents were French and their early life had been typical of the Huguenot diaspora of the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Louis Rou had been born at the Hague in 1684, where his father, a lawyer and scholar, had fled to escape growing religious persecution. He had been educated at Leyden and ordained at the Hague. Rou is known to have preached at Utrecht, London and Copenhagen, before finally settling in New York in 1710. Marie Elizabeth's mother, Renée Gougeon, had been born at Copenhagen in 1699, before the family emigrated to America.

Captain Richards and his family relocated to London at the end of the Seven Years War. An apprenticeship was found for young William with a stationer, and by the time he was released from his indentures seven years later, his father had established himself as a shipbroker in one of the lanes behind the Bank of England. Young William briefly advertised himself as a stationer, but within 18 months he was working alongside his father in the firm of William Richards & Son.

Unsurprisingly, they specialised in trade with North America, and it was only at the end of the American War of Independence that they became deeply involved in naval contracting. When Captain Richards retired in June 1785, his son formed a new partnership with David Fernie, a 35-year old Scot from Stockton-on-Tees.

Contrary to what some historians have been claimed, Richards was neither wealthy nor well-connected. One his great aunts, Denise Gougeon, served for half a century as Mistress of the King's Household at St James's Palace, and one of her sons, Richards' first cousin once removed, was a Member of Parliament and diplomat. Francis Beaufort, the mariner who invented the scale long used

for measuring wind speed, was a younger second cousin on his mother's side. At best, these extended family members might have assisted with introductions – they might, for example, have helped to arrange a meeting with the Deputy Chairman of the East India Company, who was also a Huguenot – but none of them had influence at the Navy Board.

The First Fleet tender was awarded on merit to a young man who was still making his way in the world, for whom the contract would turn out to be physically, mentally and financially demanding.

### ***Convict Contractor***

In the process, Richards transformed himself from shipbroker to convict contractor. David Fernie was uncomfortable about this, and walked away from the partnership before the fleet sailed. But over the next four or five years, Richards spent a great deal of time studying the management of convicts: it became, he said, 'my peculiar study'. For a time he employed a former shipwright named William Cowdry, who had managed prisoners of war throughout the American War of Independence, and then a convict hulk at Plymouth.

He tendered, unsuccessfully, for the Second and Third Fleets, although he did secure contracts for three other convict transports, the *Lady Juliana* in 1789 and the *Boddington* and the *Sugar Cane* in 1792. He developed detailed proposals for the management of the convict hulks, but was never successful in prising the contracts away from the long-term overseer, Duncan Campbell.

By the standards of the day, Richards was unquestionably a prison reformer. The object of punishment, as he saw it, was threefold: 'to punish them for their former deeds, to wean them from their idle & bad companions, and work a reformation in their morals that they may not return to the same crimes again'.<sup>7</sup> He was clearly influenced by the great prison reformer, John Howard, in the classification and separation of prisoners, the use of labour as an instrument of reform, the supply of simple but plentiful food, and a strong emphasis on clean and well-aired cells.

But he was also a decent human being, repeatedly arguing that those managing the hulks and transports must show 'proper care & humanity to those unfortunate wretches'. He remained optimistic that the convicts, most of whom

were repeat offenders, were capable of being reclaimed, the older ones through hard work and the acquisition of marketable skills, the younger ones through education.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Huguenot Influence***

It seems likely that his Huguenot heritage played some part in this. French Protestants had suffered a century of imprisonment and exile because of a refusal to renounce their faith, and Richards' grandfather had been the literary executor of Elias Neau, a Huguenot émigré who had developed a theology about the redeeming nature of imprisonment whilst being held in Chateau d'If, the prison later made infamous by Alexandre Dumas in *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

The Huguenots would have distinguished between men and women persecuted for their faith and common criminals transported for stealing, but his mother's family and friends had experienced imprisonment and exile, and it is not difficult to imagine what she would have said to her son when he first told her about his intended new career.

### ***Abolitionism***

But there is another possible source of this humanism: from 1779 until 1785, Richards worshipped at St Mary Woolnoth, just across from the Bank of England: that was where he married his first wife, Sarah, in 1779 and that was where he buried her two years later. The Rector of St Mary Woolnoth from 1780, and the man who presided over Sarah's funeral and burial, was Reverend John Newton, spiritual adviser to William Wilberforce and author of the Abolitionist anthem *Amazing Grace*.

In 1785, Richards & Fernie moved their counting house to George Yard, a short distance away on the other side of Lombard Street. The Quaker bookseller, James Phillips, was also located in this small court: he published the two seminal texts of the emerging Abolition movement: George Ramsay's 'Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies' (1784) and Thomas Clarkson's 'Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species' (1786). And it was on Phillips' premises, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May 1787, nine days after the First Fleet sailed, that the London Abolition Committee held its inaugural meeting.

## ***Family Life***

Nine months after Sarah's death, Richards had married Charlotte Smith at St Anne's Soho, her family church. They lived above the counting house for several years, before renting a newly-constructed terrace house at Walworth, a suburb on the southern side of the Thames which was still under development. The house was richly furnished, with dining table and chairs, a four poster bed and chests of drawers, all made of mahogany. There were 'pier glasses' (large mirrors) between the windows, and Turkish and Wilton carpets on the floors. Richards had a library of 'valuable books', two 'exceeding good clocks', a collection of prints 'by the most esteemed masters', and a microscope. By 1793, they also owned two stuffed kangaroos, a native cat (possibly a quoll) and several other Australian quadrupeds.<sup>9</sup>

William and Charlotte had one child, Mary Elizabeth, who was conceived shortly after the First Fleet sailed, but we know little else about their personal life. The Huguenots were staunch monarchists, and when, in March 1789, George III recovered from his first bout of mental illness, the front of the Richards' house was brightly illuminated with the letters G.R. surmounted by a Crown.

## ***Financial Troubles***

The total amount paid by government for the merchant vessels used in the First Fleet was £41,653, although the vast majority of this was passed through to the ship owners. We do not know what commission Richards charged, but assuming a rate of 5 percent, common at the time, then he was paid around £2,000. For the provisions, he was paid a flat rate per head per day, which means that his margin depended entirely on the rate at which he was able to purchase these articles. He was promptly paid, but given the effort which he put into procuring high quality produce, it is unlikely that he made a great deal of profit.

Other accounts remained unpaid for years – bills of exchange drawn by Governor Phillip on the Treasury to pay for salt and dry provisions, hearths and coppers, barrels and puncheons left behind at Port Jackson, and compensation for casks and spare provisions lost on the *Friendship*, a transport which was deliberately sunk on the homeward voyage. Taken together, these sundries were almost as much as the freight and victuals, and some of the payments were delayed until as late as August 1792.



Nor was he paid for the hundreds of hours he spent in negotiating the contracts of effectual transportation with local justice officials – because the Navy Board had not known about the need for these documents and they were not part of the original contract.

It is unsurprising, then, that Richards found himself in financial difficulty. In June 1789, he borrowed £500 from his father, who was forced to sell some of his shares so that his son could settle his debts. The First Fleet had been a costly exercise, but Richards had acquired an understanding of how convict transportation worked, and he had invested heavily in an asset that he believed the government would value in the years ahead – a reputation for quality and humanity. As it turned out, the Navy Board placed no value on this at all. While he was given the contract for *Lady Juliana* without tender, the next two contracts – for the Second and Third Fleets – were awarded to a firm of slave traders who submitted low-ball bids.

The Home Office did award William Richards one further contract, to carry out Irish convicts in 1792. He had some difficulty in finding two suitable vessels, and he was required to personally invest in one of them, but a surge in costs caused by the outbreak of war meant that these voyages were also unprofitable.

In October 1793, Richards was placed in bankruptcy by his father, who was hoping to recoup some of the money he had loaned his son following the First Fleet. Richards originally hoped that he would be able to negotiate with his creditors, but he was not successful. By October 1795, he had fled to America: it is not possible to establish which of the several ‘Williams Richards and family’ who emigrated to the United States around this time is them. His mother passed away in November 1804, leaving the residual of her estate to Reverend Thomas Thirlwall of Mile End, in trust for her granddaughter, Mary Elizabeth Richards, when she turned 21 years of age. There was no mention of her son, whose bankruptcy remained unresolved.

## **Assessment**

William Richards was not a commercial success as a convict contractor: he did not have sufficient capital to cover the risks, and he wrongly assumed that government was looking to find a long-term contractor, as they had with transportation of convicts to North America and the management of the hulks. He was highly regarded by Evan Nepean, the Permanent Under Secretary at the

Home Office, and if Nepean had been responsible for managing the transportation contracts, then Richards' gamble might have paid off. But the Navy Board operated a system of low price tenders, and the contracts for the Second and Third Fleets went to the formidable London partnership of Camden, Calvert & King.

He was highly regarded by his contemporaries. In July 1791, after the unsuccessful bids for the Second and Third Fleets, Sir Joseph Banks wrote to Richards:

I have not been inattentive to the success with which the convicts have been carried out in your vessels and have regarded the comparative healthiness of those on board the *Lady Juliana* with the unfortunate crews of the *Scarborough* etc [i.e., the Second Fleet]. . . I have always spoken well of you and your mode of managing convicts. . .<sup>10</sup>

When the *Boddington* arrived in Sydney Cove in August 1793, David Collins, who was by now the de facto Colonial Secretary, wrote in his journal:

Mr. Richards jun, who had the contract for supplying the ships which sailed for this country in 1788 and the *Lady Juliana* transport, was employed again by government; a circumstance of general congratulation among the colonists on its being made known. . . No ship. . . could have brought out their convicts in higher order, nor could have given stronger proofs of attention to their health and accommodation, than did this vessel.<sup>11</sup>

And on the arrival of the *Sugar Cane* six weeks later, the Acting Governor, Major Francis Grose, wrote to the Home Secretary:

The contractor, as well in this ship as the *Boddingtons*, appears to have performed his engagement with great liberality, & the prisoners they have conveyed prove by their healthy appearance, the extraordinary attention that must have been paid by the Naval Agents. In two ships containing three hundred and three people, one person only had died, & amongst those landed in the colony, scarcely anyone sick.<sup>12</sup>

By the time Grose's letter arrived in England six months later, Richards was bankrupt and the contents of their terrace house at Walworth had been put up for sale.

He did not make a fortune, and he died in obscurity, but William Richards deserves to be remembered as the man who tried to make convict transportation an honourable trade. The reward for being a good man is a good name: historians have an obligation to honour that name.

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<sup>1</sup> AGL Shaw, *Convicts & the Colonies*, London: Faber and Faber, 1966; Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*, London: Collins Harvill, 1987, p. 70; Charles Bateson, *The Convict Ships, 1787-1868* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.), Glasgow: Brown, Son & Ferguson, 1969, pp. 11 & 20.

<sup>2</sup> M. Barnard Eldershaw, *Phillip of Australia* [1938], Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1972, p. 35; Eris O'Brien, *The Foundation of Australia* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1950, p. 140; Jonathan King, *The First Fleet*, London: Secker & Warburg, 1982, pp. 133, 154; David Hill, *1788: The Brutal Truth of the First Fleet*, Sydney: William Heinemann, 2008, p. 51; Alan Brooke & David Brandon, *Bound for Botany Bay: British Convict Voyages to Australia*, Kew: The National Archives, 2005, p. 42; Tom Keneally, *The Commonwealth of Thieves*, Sydney: Random House Australia, 2005, pp. 49-51.

<sup>3</sup> Wilfrid Oldham, 'The Administration of the System of Transportation of British Convicts, 1763-1793', PhD Dissertation, University of London, 1933, pp. 323-339; Mollie Gillen, 'The Botany Bay Decision, 1786: Convicts Not Empire', *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 97, No. 385 (1982), pp. 740-766 at pp. 757-758; Roger Knight, 'The First Fleet: Its State and Preparation, 1786-1787', in John Hardy and Alan Frost (eds.), *Studies from Terra Australis to Australia*, Occasional Paper No. 6, Canberra: Australian Academy of the Humanities, 1989, pp. 121-136; Alan Frost, *Convicts & Empire: A Naval Question*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1980, pp. 130, 190-191; and more importantly, Alan Frost, *Botany Bay Mirages*, Melbourne University Press, 1994, p. 112; Michael Flynn, *The Second Fleet: Britain's Grim Convict Armada of 1790*, Sydney: Library of Australian History, 1993, especially pp. 2, 13, 15, 16, 17, 22, 23, 26, 53, 64, 71, 79.

While Richards was not a significant figure in her research, Perry McIntyre grasped the complexity of his role in her 2005 PhD dissertation – Perry C. McIntyre, *'Deserted and despised innocent sufferers': The immigration of free families of convicts to New South Wales 1788-1852*, PhD Dissertation, University of Western Sydney, 2005, pp. 22-24. Mention should also be made of Dan Byrnes, who discovered Richards' bankruptcy, among other things.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Gidley King, 'Remarks and Journal', 20 January 1788, State Library of NSW (hereafter SLNSW), Safe C115, pp. 122-123.

<sup>5</sup> David Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, Volume 1, [1798], Sydney: A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1975, pp. 1-2; Watkin Tench, 'A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay' [1789], published in Watkin Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, Sydney: Library of Australian History, 1797, p. 32.

<sup>6</sup> Gary L. Sturges, 'A Government Affair? Reassessing the Contractual Arrangements for Australia's First Fleet', Part 1, *The Great Circle*, (2016) Vol. 38, No. 2, pp. 1-25 & 'A Government Affair? Reassessing the Management of Australia's First Fleet', Part 2, *The Great Circle*, (2017) Vol. 39, No. 1, pp. 29-54.

<sup>7</sup> William Richards, 'Proposals and Plan', enclosed with Richards to Treasury, 14 October 1788, UK National Archives (hereafter TNA) HO35/9.

<sup>8</sup> Richards to Pitt, 29 March 1788, TNA PRO30/8/171/27.

<sup>9</sup> *Gazetteer & New Daily Advertiser*, 30 December 1793, p. 4; *Times*, 31 December 1793, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Reverse of Richards' letter of 19 July, SLNSW, CY3008/470-473.

<sup>11</sup> David Collins, op. cit., p. 255.

<sup>12</sup> Grose to Dundas, 12 October 1793, TNA CO201/8/93, Historical Records of New South Wales 2:69.